

HOT MEALS FOR THE HOLIDAY



JOANNA JHANDA/STAFF

JUDGE SAUNDRA ARMSTRONG, of the Oakland Federal District Court, volunteered at the Communities United Feast at the Scottish Rite Temple on Tuesday. More than 2,000 homeless and low-income people received holiday meals at the annual event.

Volunteers serve a hearty Thanksgiving to the needy

By Michal Lando
STAFF WRITER

The city hosted its ninth-annual Thanksgiving dinner Tuesday at the Scottish Rite Temple for homeless and low-income residents who otherwise might not have had the opportunity to celebrate. And the dinner was nothing less than a celebration — an all-inclusive feast of turkey and trimmings accompanied by live performances of local artists.

"The event is about respecting the dignity of the people who are here eating, and it is about serving and being served," said

Rae Mary, manager of Community Housing Services, part of Oakland's Community Economic Development Agency and one of the groups responsible for hosting the event.

Mary said some 2,200 people were expected at the event — a 10 percent increase from last year's crowd.

Organizers of "Communities United Feast" strive to bring together the city's many ethnic communities and allows residents throughout Oakland to give

See DINNER, Page 11

**From *The Montclarion*
Oakland, California
Nov. 23, 2001**

Dinner

FROM PAGE 1

something back to their community. Performers included the East Bay Korean Charity Choir, the mariachi band Tlatoani, and Rhonda Benin and Soulful Strut, a rhythm-and-blues group.

Jong Lee, chairman of the annual Thanksgiving dinner committee and former president of the Korean Chamber of Commerce, said there were more volunteers from the Asian community this year than ever before. "The Korean community and other Asian communities felt that they were in a marginal community all along, and they wanted to use this as a vehicle to get back to the mainline community," Jong said.

The event was staffed by some 125 volunteers from many organizations, including: the East Bay Korean Chamber of Commerce, Emergency Food Providers Committee, Oakland Police Department, Oakland Licensed Day Care Operators' Association and the Oakland Fire Department.

There are between 5,000-7,000 homeless people in Oakland on any given day and 376 shelter beds, according to the Oakland Community Housing Services Agency.

"We are constantly working towards improving the situation," Mary said.

"But unfortunately with rising housing prices and rising utility rates, it puts us back farther than where we were, even if we increase our resources somewhat. And we can't always do that, because we simply don't always

have more resources to offer."

Mary acknowledged that city agencies and shelters in Oakland are being visited by an increasing number of working people who can't afford to feed their families.

"We are seeing more people being turned away from our food distribution lines and more people being turned away from our shelters, and we are seeing a larger segment of families — especially large families — ending up homeless or marginally managing to pay for housing but having to choose between paying their utility bills and feeding their children," Mary said.

Many of the urban poor are fleeing Oakland and cities across California due to rising housing costs, said Diana Polson, the California Poor People's Economic Rights campaign coordinator at the Women's Economic Agenda Project, an Oakland-based group working to end poverty.

According to data gathered by the Project, 45 percent of Alameda County renters are unable to afford the 1999 fair market rent for a two-bedroom apartment and as of March 2001, there are 2,626 households on the waiting list for Section 8 housing. No new applications are being accepted, and there are no plans to open the waiting list.

Additional data shows that fewer than 50 percent of those who receive Section 8 approval can find housing in Alameda County. In California the living wage is set at \$32,701 per year for a family of three; the national poverty level is set at \$13,880 per year for a family of three.

Regina Jackson, a volunteer at Tuesday's dinner, said she was evicted from her house near Lake

Merritt after having lived there for 10 years. She recently moved to a residence near 32nd and Market streets after being homeless for several months.

"It is not the best area, not the best neighborhood, but it is home," Jackson said. "I would like to live by the lake, because it is safer for a person in my (disabled) condition. But the rent is so ridiculous, and it's so hard to find a place — so I am stuck on 32nd."

According to Billi Okoh, a Crestmont resident and executive assistant director of the Oakland Licensed Day Care Operators Association, "big government" has done its part, and it's up to individuals to fill in the gaps.

"I think it is citizenry that are really going to make a difference in terms of pushing the importance of community programs," Okoh said.

"I live in the Crestmont area, so I am far from the people here today. But I think it is important that people remain community connected. In order for communities to have an impact on their environment, they have to be committed to doing something in their environment."

All the staff at the daycare association volunteered their time at Tuesday's event, volunteering in shifts so that the center could stay open.

"This is the best meal I've had in a while," said Edward Tate, a homeless man who spends most of his nights under bridges in Oakland. "My family is gone. But this is Thanksgiving, and I felt like this is going to be the best Thanksgiving that I've had. I feel like tradition is back in Oakland again."